

United Way of York Region
CEO Daniele Zanotti
announced the launch of
the three-year In Every
Neighbourhood fundraising
campaign this year.



FILE PHOTO

Zanotti seeks \$30M for United Way

BY CHRIS TRABER
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Author Ernest Hemingway defined courage as grace under pressure.

The interpretation aptly describes the finesse and fearlessness of United Way of York Region CEO Daniele Zanotti.

Especially in 2013.

During the summer, United Way of York Region announced a major departure from its traditional fundraising model.

Rather than embarking on an annual campaign as it did in 2012, raising more than \$7.4 million, Mr. Zanotti unveiled an ambitious three-year, \$30-million initiative.

The math suggests a record goal: \$10 million annually on average.

As of December, the In Every Neighbourhood campaign is \$6 million to the good.

In the next three years, United Way is committed to helping 75,000 people reach economic independence, 100,000 children and youths stay in school and succeed in life and 150,000 people — newcomers, seniors and individuals with mental and physical disabilities — get the supports they need, Mr. Zanotti said.

It's a challenge to continually meet the changing needs of our growing municipalities, he admitted.

In Mr. Zanotti's patented, indefatigable manner, he is confident York's residents and corporate citizens and United Way's 41 partner agencies will not only meet, but exceed, goals.

The previous 12 months' hallmark has been the power of community, he said.

The agency's Meeting House program, a series of community dialogues on our region's most pressing social issues, often left him in awe.

"At each meeting, I was humbled and inspired by residents who are making a difference locally," he said. "People are struggling through tough times. With agency and community support, they're coming out the other end resilient, strong and successful."

Civic participation is the single most sustainable way to address the region's most

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pressing issues, he said.

Healthy and engaged citizens are able to support strong neighbourhoods and vibrant communities.

Strength Investments, launched in 2010, goes beyond the formal programs United Way traditionally funds and supports everyday people and groups already at work in their communities.

In 2013, Mr. Zanotti and his staff raised \$1.8 million in new money to fund the program that, in turn, improved many more marginalized people's lives.

York Region's generosity and the will and skill demonstrated by the agency and its army of volunteers buoy him.

"It reinforces for me that people have the power to make change," he said. "In each of our neighbourhoods, we have huge strength and capacity when we support and harness it."

"We're working hard toward engaging and getting people involved and excited about our work. We're all better when there is a United Way program in the municipality."

Mr. Zanotti's wish for the New Year and beyond is for every resident to become civically involved.

"An involved neighbourhood has empowered citizenry, people who can access agency services" he said. "That's a major rally call for the region and United Way."

In early 2014, he will update the dollar tally for the three-year campaign. In the past, when announcing new initiatives or achievements, the entertainer in him took over.

He has used cue cards to present staff awards when laryngitis silenced him. He has regaled audiences in full Mad Hatter attire.

A new character will emerge in January, he hinted, referring to his theatrical self.

That, undoubtedly, is also his hope for York Region's less-involved citizens.

York Regional Police have fun with Twitter account

BY JEREMY GRIMALDI
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Policing is serious business, but that doesn't mean cops don't like to have the odd chuckle every now and again, even when it is about breaking the law.

York Regional Police's Twitter account grew by leaps and bounds this year after the corporate communications department found a new way to speak to people: by taking a bit of starch out of their collars.

"We started using the language of Twitter ... humour and sarcasm," Const. Andy Pattenden said.

By all accounts, the approach has been a success.

Not only are police reaching young people, a vital audience, but they are also having their messages read by folks halfway around the world.

A case in point occurred this past summer, when an officer spotted a young Vaughan resident broadcasting his wish for a joint over social media.

The young man initially wrote: "Any dealers in Vaughan wanna make a 20sac chop? Come to Keele/Langstaff Mr. Lube, need a spliff."

Rather than ignoring or replying in a condescending manner, police took another approach: a light-hearted, humorous reply.

"Awesome, can we come too?" the force answered.

The response from the Twitter universe was huge and immediate.

The message was retweeted 7,200 times and published in countless newspapers around the world after yorkregion.com published the exchange.

@YRP now has 15,000 followers, double its 2012 number.

"The beauty of Twitter is that anything we do on there, we're not pushing out a message, but engaging in conversations with people," Const. Pattenden said. "It lets them know we're human."

It is also a great way to let people, who would not otherwise read details of crimes, know what is going on in their communities, he added.

"When we tweeted out details of cellphone robberies on Halloween, people responded with things like, 'Really. This kind of stuff happens in Markham?'," he added.

These have not been the only messages that have caught people's attention.

In reply to a young woman who explained how she had just sparked up a joint outside a police station, @YRP wrote: "That awkward moment when you realize you just drew way too much unwanted attention to yourself. Drugs are bad Brittany."

There have been countless others, including a response to a man who repeatedly swore at police over Twitter, with the message: "Thank-you for your kind words. Unlike most people you might say that to, we will still be there to help you in an emergency."

And another silly tweet after a cow was spotted walking up Jane Street: "COW ALERT — Reports of a cow walking N/B on Jane St north of 16th Ave. Drive with caution and refrain from yelling moo out of the window".

Technology in the fields of social media and crime fighting are converging at a fast pace.

Police may eventually be able to locate crime scenes through software, called media sonar, which can track high volumes of tweets after crimes occur.

"It's not all fun and games. There's a purpose, too," Const. Pattenden said.

Emerald ash borer leaves its mark across region

BY SEAN PEARCE
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2013 has been a rough year for ash trees in York Region.

This was the year we really began to see the impacts of the emerald ash borer, especially in Vaughan, Richmond Hill and Markham, where more than one municipal boulevard has been laid bare because of their voracious appetites.

We also learned the pesky pests have spread to the northernmost parts of the region, East Gwillimbury and Georgina, and are now well established there, meaning untreated trees in both municipalities will be dead or in serious decline within just a few years.

Last month, the region acknowledged it is losing the battle against the borer, but also

made it clear the war is far from over.

"In general, we are on the losing end of things, like everyone is," York's invasive species specialist Stacey Bowman said. "There's no way to eradicate it and, at this point, all you can really do is try to slow its spread."

That effort has involved treating healthy trees with special insecticides and removing ash trees that are too far gone and replacing them with other species, she said.

In 2011, the region approved a 10-year, \$10-million emerald ash borer management plan.

In 2014, the cost of emerald ash borer management in York municipalities is expected to be nearly \$5 million, while the total bill, spread out over a decade, is anticipated to exceed \$52 million for the region and its local municipalities combined.